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978-1-107-41815-8 - Poetry and Contemplation: A New Preface to Poetics

G. Rostrevor Hamilton

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*POETRY*  
&  
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*POETRY*  
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A NEW PREFACE TO  
POETICS

by

G. ROSTREVOR HAMILTON



CAMBRIDGE  
AT THE UNIVERSITY PRESS

1937

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*To*

R. R. MARETT

*Rector of Exeter College, Oxford*

IN MEMORY OF

HAPPY YEARS

1907–11

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## INTRODUCTION

A little more than two years ago, thinking that I might perhaps take a hand at the reviewing of poetry—which I had never yet done—I set myself to consider first principles, especially in the light of current theory. To begin with, I read an interesting book, then recently published, *The Critique of Poetry*, by Mr Michael Roberts: and from that I went on to *The Principles of Literary Criticism*, by Dr I. A. Richards, a book which had been extremely influential in the ten years since its first appearance. Soon I was in the toils, fascinated and plagued by the difficulties that lurk behind the question, What is Poetry?

The *Principles* I found exceedingly stimulating. Its enquiries went deep, it was often illuminating when it touched on particular poems, and above all it was a brave attempt at systematic thinking on original lines. It seemed to be fundamentally right in the emphasis it laid on the organization, the complex harmony, of poetic experience: and it seemed, in nearly everything else, to be fundamentally wrong. It was wrong about the mind and character of poets: wrong about art and morals: wrong about the relation of poetry to life, and wrong about the place of the poet in society. And it was not only wrong. I believed—and I believe now—that it has had a definitely harmful effect, not only on poetic theory, not only on criticism, but also on the writing of poetry itself. The modern poet is self-conscious in a high degree, and his practice is much under the sway of theory.

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The influence of the *Principles* has, I think, been due partly to its assumption of scientific authority, and partly to a real virtue, that of system. The need for coherent system is deeply felt nowadays. “Our young men and women”, says J. L. Stocks, writing on ‘The Need for a Social Philosophy’, “are attracted in large and probably increasing numbers to the Marxist creed, not so much because it is adequate and theoretically unanswerable, as because it is the only coherent body of doctrine that they can find.”<sup>1</sup> It has been pretty much the same, in the sphere of literature, with the teaching of Dr Richards.

My small book is only a preface to poetics. Anything more ambitious in scope would require more leisure, for thinking and reading and thinking, than I have. None the less, the ‘preface’ is ambitious in aim, for it seeks not merely to criticize the teaching of Dr Richards (and, incidentally, certain other current views) but to help towards laying a new foundation for the theory of poetry.

I would like to mention one or two books, in my slender reading, which have helped me in various ways. Among these is Mr Sturge Moore’s *Armour for Aphrodite*: while radically disagreeing with the objective theory which forms part of its basis, I was constantly impressed by the pointed wisdom of its judgment. What, for a single example, could be better than this? “Every artist contracts defects and mannerisms which betray his identity—sign what he had rather not have signed, and, like the criminal’s thumb-mark, help the expert to track him. Genuineness is not excellence.” Next I would mention M. Charles Mauron’s *Aesthetics and Psychology*, a bril-

<sup>1</sup> *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 1935–36, p. 17.

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liant, clear and entertaining essay. Then there is Miss Joanna Field's *A Life of One's Own*, a book of unusual interest and a remarkable testimony to the value of contemplation. And I must not omit a reference to Miss E. M. Bartlett's paper 'The Determination of the Aesthetic Minimum',<sup>1</sup> a penetrating essay (for all its forbidding title) to which I acknowledge my debt.

But a deeper indebtedness than any is one of old standing. Although I do not accept M. Bergson's theory of intuition as a faculty opposed to the intellect, I am convinced that his doctrine of *la durée*—of time and change and freedom—is profoundly true. It has influenced not only my thought but my whole imaginative outlook. Dr Richards refers somewhere, with characteristic intolerance, to the 'dry-rot-like invasion' of Bergsonism. The many who misunderstand M. Bergson may have made his philosophy the excuse for silly and irrational views. But that philosophy is, when properly understood, a severe intellectual discipline. Clear thinking in relation to the dynamic movement of life is far more difficult than clear thinking in relation to a neat static universe, constructed by man for the convenience of his own analysis: and clear thinking is not too common, even in that easier relation.

G. R. H.

<sup>1</sup> *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 1934–35, pp. 113–36.